



Note du CREOGN

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FROM CONTACT TO COMMUNITY POLICING

In France, contact and community policing make the headlines of the public security scene. Recent research papers¹, the call for projects made by the French Interior minister or even the political concept of “daily police patrol” testify it. Notwithstanding the sensitive terrorist context, it would be inappropriate to consider police forces' action to be merely reactive, repressive or simply deterrent.

As of 1720, the Maréchaussée (the gendarmerie's ancestry) territorial grid was based on a network of local stations (called “*brigades*”) and “*compagnies*” (the immediate superior level to the brigades). Gendarmes worked and lived in contact with the public and within it. In the course of the 20th century, both the technification and the specialization of the security forces widened the gap between the police and the population, and their relationship may have been dehumanized because of technocratic tendencies². In the same way, sociological and human geography developments may have been somewhat belatedly taken into account. The police forces' legitimacy, and the trust people place in them, are affected in consequence. This is clearly highlighted by allegations against security forces, as well as the recent developments in the forms of protests and crimes. Contact and community policing primarily aim at forging confidence, and at enhancing the legitimacy of the police force serving a democratic government. It was, by the way, the very idea which drove Sir Robert Peel to set up a modern police force in London in 1829. The French sociologists Sébastien Roché³ and Christian Mouhanna⁴ also take up this idea, questioning the relationship between the police and the people they serve and protect. The creation, in 2016, of a French National Guard -made up of reservists and volunteers- seems to be a concrete illustration of the growing awareness of the political authorities as regards these issues.

So as to pro-actively address immediate public safety issues, the French gendarmerie has initiated a new experimental operational stage. The implementation of the so-called *brigades territoriales de contact* (local contact stations) shows this will of recreating links and reinforcing the gendarmerie territorial grid, in order to work as closely as possible to the citizens.

If indeed community policing and contact go together, we may distinguish them, in order to better understand how they interact with one another. If “community policing” is commonly used as a generic term, it contains tenets that are crucial for public safety. Contact -as a tool in the service of community policing- is a fundamental skill. It may even be an identity issue for gendarmes and policemen.

1. Community policing : what are we talking about ?

Community policing⁵ is a strategy for the conduct of security public policies, but also a mode of operation for police forces. It may have a bad press in France, in particular because of misunderstandings or bad translations, awkwardly interpreted as minority-based -or even a “communitarianist”- policing. But that is nothing of the sort.

1 de Maillard J., 2016, *Police et population : pour des relations de confiance*, Terra Nova
2 Mouhanna C., 2011, *La police contre les citoyens ?*, éditions Champ social.
3 Roché S., 2016, *De la police en démocratie*, éditions Grasset.
4 <https://www.thelocal.fr/20170217/heres-what-needs-to-be-done-about-the-french-police>
5 Jobard F., de Maillard J., 2015, *Sociologie de la police*, Paris, Armand Colin, p.171-197.

In the late 1990's, the French National Police experimented the "*police de proximité*" which the then Interior Minister called for. Even if the project was based on police practice truisms (*visible police officer*), it also developed the more innovative notions of empowerment, of contact with the population as well as partnership. A noticeable increase in crime figures, the political changeover and organizational floundering hampered the success of the scheme. Standard models in performing policing missions have reimposed themselves since the early 2000's. They have nevertheless shown their limits, sometimes to the point of bringing the police force into a vicious circle of reaction, repression, discredit and de-legitimization, magnified by media hype.

The aim of a police force in a democracy is not only to perform its missions efficiently, but also to rely on a strong legitimacy, built on mutual confidence with citizens. In public security matters, the notion of community policing finds its roots across the Pond, in the 1960's-70's, at a time when American police forces faced -through a series of violent protests and a sharp growth in criminality- a loss of legitimacy in carrying out actions and a lack of confidence from the population.

Some consider community policing as a security philosophy; others identify it as a set of tactics like foot patrols, prevention campaigns in schools, mobile outposts, *etc.* Giving a definition would be challenging, but comprehending the scope of its action is much more feasible.

Community policing allows to escape the vicious circle described here-above, and to make the police force "a public force at the service of the public"⁶; it is based on a service delivered. Both practice and literature allow us to list four tenets :

The first tenet is the decentralisation of action. Operational priority is given to the front-line police officers, or at least to the unit that has to deal with the issues people face. They can and have to take initiatives in their missions, especially the ones relating to public peace.

The second of them is partnership with local communities, other public administrations, the private sector and with non-profit organizations. This tenet is inherent to the duty of any gendarme or policeman. On the one side, it is informal, and it is reflected day-to-day in all the relations and contacts that are established among the actors who live in a given area. On the other side, it can also be mentioned in conventions and protocols which bring together two or more entities on a same security issue. For instance, the SAGES program (French acronym for "global securing of the school environment") binds the national gendarmerie to the national education ministry in an elaborate partnership. The so-called prevention territorial advisor, present in each gendarmerie basic command unit, is another example that perfectly embodies this principle.

The third is public engagement and that of their representatives (elected, from non-profit organizations, institutions, business) to the public safety mission. For security is no longer the exclusive preserve of police forces : here is a fact we have to deal with. The so-called *participation citoyenne*⁷ (aka "neighborhood watch" in the United Kingdom, *Nachbarschaftshilfe* in Germany), "*tranquillité vacances*" or "*tranquillité senior*" operations are perfect illustrations of this engagement.

Lastly, the fourth tenet -which has appeared recently in practice and reflection- is a consequence to the three previous ones: **the notion of accountability**. It is translated into action chiefly through the "problem oriented policing"⁸ approach, which implies collectively setting priorities and anticipating a problematic, a phenomena or an event. It echoes the idea of "public security co-production", the participation to projects under local leadership, in which everyone commits himself, at least by providing means or by getting involved in some actions. Such a close relationship is well illustrated by the sharing of decision-making process, concerning the implementation of solutions, or of concerted and coordinated actions, such as for instance setting up social workers in gendarmerie or police stations, in order to tackle domestic violence. Besides, as lessons learned show, any inactive partner in a project, or anyone who retracts, excludes himself from the field of action, *de facto* losing his credibility.

6 Dieu F., Latour X., Vallar C., 2016, *Gendarmerie, service public, service au public*, éditions Mare et Martin

7 <https://www.gendarmerie.interieur.gouv.fr/Nos-conseils2/pour-les-collectivites/Participation-citoyenne-devenir-acteur-de-sa-securite>

8 Goldstein H., 1990, *Problem-oriented policing*, McGraw-Hill edition.

These four principles combine differently from one territory -or country- to another. Implementing community policing depends on history and local negotiation. Problems arising in urban areas are different from those prevailing in rural areas; and the entities involved may have an influence and an organization, which slightly differ according to their location. Consequently, there is no single model or unique definition of what community policing is. It is not a doctrine, but a concept, which aims at implementing a police strategy. Instead of being at odds with the standard intervention and reaction models, it completes them advantageously, thanks to the depth of knowledge it brings in any crisis situation or in taking law enforcement actions. However, community policing-related principles and processes cannot be achieved unless the stakeholders know one another, meet and exchange.

2. Contact, a tool for community policing

Community policing relies on a police officer and on the relationship he builds with the public. Contact⁹ surely stands for a physical person, but also a relationship, which is built on a true proficiency. Contact differs from community policing.

Gendarmes and policemen are both visible and wear uniforms. They play a part in the meshing of the territory, whether it is in an urban or in a rural area. They both mirror a certain conception of the State, which must reflect blameless social skills. Beyond wearing a uniform, “[he] has to listen to citizens, to provide them advises, support victims, be welcoming, polite and friendly, and not arrogant, distant, harsh or even aggressive¹⁰”. These social skills are not innate; a police officer acquires them during initial training and education, and he develops them through experience and life-long training. We need to move beyond simplistic watchwords like: “Go out and speak to the public !”, and not only rely on late career police officers’ experience to transfer skills.

Knowledge means knowing the ground, the actors and their history, and even more understanding their interactions. This is the way François Dieu and Paul Mignon describe it in a study¹¹ they conducted on the observation of a gendarmerie patrol near Saint-Hillaire, in the *Aude* county.

Knowledge is built, and it rests, on a certain know-how, which needs to be learned. It not only refers to the ability of making contact with people, but also to maintain it. This know-how can vary according to the missions a gendarme or policeman is tasked with (criminal investigation, prevention). Contact in community policing is targeted; it has to be prepared for the purpose of building relationships. Hence, French police officers establish relations consciously. For instance this is the case, for the police-population cohesion delegates¹², introduced in 2008, with the aim of reconciling the police with people living in poor suburbs, and to restore confidence.

Their social skills are their business card, their knowledge, their credibility, and their know-how their ability to listen, to dialog and thus to forge ties. These links reassure and prevent on both sides ; they expand police knowledge so that they may act more directly or through other actors. By the way, this relationship is two-way : officers are approachable and they let people approach them. In the same vein, officers must meet people. In doing so they enable trust and settle a certain legitimacy. Contact also means spending time understanding people and their environment. It is therefore much more than a simple handshake and a question you ask waiting for a conventional answer; it is hardly quantifiable and controllable, setting a limit to pure technocratic approaches.

Paying attention to the practice of contact several sociological studies³ pointed out a few discrepancies. Some populations are indeed more frequently in relation with the security forces (eg. recurring complainants, visible minorities) whereas other have but scarce contacts with the police officers (eg. people facing no security problem, mobile populations, new residents). Professional routine, ill-adapted training, or even biased, may be the cause for it. This discrepancy reveals a loss of legitimacy, mostly in the poorest areas. That is the reason why it is a subject which deserves to be

9 *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary*, 2010, Oxford University Press edition, p. 325

10 Weiss H., Henrion H., 2011, *La police de proximité en Allemagne*, éditions A.Pédone.

11 Dieu F. et Mignon P., 2002, *Sécurité et proximité, la mission de surveillance générale de la gendarmerie*, éditions de l'harmattan, p.34-38.

12 Gayet-Viaud C., de Maillard J., Jobard F., 2017, *Une innovation policière : les délégués à la cohésion police-population*, Questions pénales-Cesdip.

explored, through training in particular, in order to widen the scope of contacts, to diversify their nature, and to restore the legitimacy of police action.

France has not been the only country to initiate such an in-depth reflection on how to police the society. The United States set up, in the 2000's, "community oriented policing officers", whose role is to meet people in order to collect information¹³. In Italy, since 2002, both policemen and *carabinieri* have been given the task of developing contacts with people in urban centers. In Germany, the practice of contact came before the one of community policing. Since the 1970's, indeed, the concept of *Bürgerpolizist* or *Kontaktbeamte* (contact officers) have spread across most *Bundesländer*. In all cases, this mission is fulfilled wearing an uniform, patrolling on foot in a delimited area, by an experienced and specifically trained staff, who emphasizes interpersonal contact, and cooperates with other security forces. Except in Italy, they still have coercive prerogatives. The United Kingdom -the very cradle of this kind of strategies and tactics- had been successful in maintaining its capabilities and relying on a legitimate police force, which inspired the high degree of confidence that police community support officers personify¹⁴. Yet, accounting -or even technocratic- rationalization measures in the management of the police gave rise to severe budget cuts, leading by the way to a weakening of the whole due to a drastic staff reduction, and feeding in turn a polemic across the Channel¹⁵. Among all these schemes, the French gendarmerie is the only police force, which has decided to establish -on an experimental basis yet- an unit entirely dedicated to contact.

Paradoxically, contact may also rely on a certain distance, which the digital transformation enables. The digital revolution is a tool, which can also be used in the purpose of fluidifying and facilitating contact ; the use in the gendarmerie of the "Neogend" digital tablet¹⁶ is a proof of that fact. The establishment of a "brigade numérique" (*digital police station*)¹⁷ is a further illustration of the ambitious nature of the project to meet citizens' expectations. Contact can indeed be conceived in a first time in a dematerialized way, before becoming a face-to-face relationship, better targeted and prepared beforehand by a public service truly in the service of the public. This kind of contact can be describe as a digital proximity, which has already been experimented through the police forces' *Facebook* and *Twitter* accounts, both at national and local levels. Such a possibility is also offered by online complaint forms. Using this kind of tools illustrates that we can find in them the characteristics of contact described here above. "Digital contact" is an instrument of proximity ; the contact operator both produces and provides a service.

Community policing would hardly live without contact. We need to consider the later as the *sine qua non* condition of the first. If gendarmes and policemen were not to have the "contact" competence, hopes for an appropriate community policing would be less than realistic. In the same vein, one cannot expect the whole edifice to rest on the contact level. Front-line, middle and senior police managers do have crucial roles to play, as supervisors and facilitators, to invigorate community policing in giving it, on the one hand, the appropriate framework and directions to the lower levels (cf. top-down approach), and on the other hand, in having the capability of taking advantage of the outcomes that contact working yields (cf. bottom-up approach). This is precisely in this context that sustainable trust relationship can be regenerated, or developed, so that security forces' legitimacy may be enhanced.

13 Delpeuch T., Ross J., 2010, *L'intelligence led policing aux USA : enseignements pour la France*, Rapport pour la délégation à la prospective et à la stratégie, p.17.

14 <https://nationalcareerservice.direct.gov.uk/job-profiles/police-community-support-officer>

15 Levy A., July 19th 2016, *Wealthy Essex village pays security guards*, Daily Mail.

16 *Neogend*, Gend Info 384, February 2016, p.28-39.

17 *La brigade numérique*, Gend Info 396, May 2017, p.18-19.